Mob & Drag – an odd couple for sure.

These two seem like an unlikely pairing but there is more than one intersection for the two.

The first is through Anna, the wife of Vito Genovese who is the first subject with a (NY) *Daily News* article from 1953 first which is cited in the following Wikipedia entry.

The second intersection involves two Mob hitmen, Davey Petillo and Charles Gagliiodotto, who routinely dressed in drag to get close to their intended victims.

Village Joints Probe Seeks Mrs. Genovese

By JAMES DESMOND

Mrs. Anna Genovese, talkative wife of gangster Vito Genovese, is being sought by the State Liquor Authority for questioning in connection with her sworn charges that the crime syndicate owns several Greenwich Village night clubs, THE NEWS learned yesterday. The night clubs themselves already are under investigation.

Mrs. Genovese made her charges in testimony in Superior Court in Freehold, N. J., on March 2, but ever since has been ducking law enforcement agencies, which are seeking fuller explanations. Her lawyer contends that she has been so terrorized since making the charges that she cannot submit to further questioning.

Go Ahead With Probe.

While waiting to get hold of Mrs. Genovese, the SLA has gone ahead with its probe of three night spots she mentioned as being run by front men for the mobs.

The most notable of the places is the Club Savannah, 66 W. Third St., where, according to testimony before the State Crime Commission, Anthony (Tony Bender) Strollo, Greenwich Village mob overlord, and Joe Adonis, the gambler, played cards nightly before Jersey jailed Adonis.

The Savannah is known in the underworld as "Tony Bender's joint," but the papers of incorporation list Joseph Schiavone and Sabatino M. Spina as the only officers, shareholders and directors.

The second place under investigation is the 82 Club at 82 E. Fourth St., which, according to the papers of incorporation, is owned by one Anthony Schiavone and Matthew Jacobson, who also are the only officers and directors.

The third place is the Moroccan Village at 23 W. Eighth St., which Mrs. Genovese has described as a hangout of her gangster-husband. This club, according to SLA records, is solely owned by Alan J. Bono, who is also president. Directors are Bono, Virginia Bono and Harry Pflaster.

Could Face License Loss.

If the investigation supports Mrs. Genovese's charges against these three places, they face loss of their liquor licenses, which would be tantamount to closing them down.

Mrs. Anna Genovese
Terrorized, says her lawyer.

A fourth joint mentioned by Mrs. Genovese as gang-owned was her own Caravan Club at 578 W. Broadway, which was stripped of its liquor license six or seven years ago because it was generally disorderly. The lush Anna, according to testimony in the Superior Court in Freehold, contributed to the disorder herself by felling a sailor with a bar stool in one of the Caravan's most notable brawls.

Mrs. Genovese's charges that the mobs were running night clubs were made in her bitterly fought suit for $350 weekly separate maintenance in Superior Court in Freehold. The testimony, in which she described Genovese as a boss of the Italian lottery with a weekly take running from $20,000 to $30,000, was designed to show that the mobster could easily afford the alimony.

Daily News (NY)
Thu, Mar 19, 1953
Page 89

WIKIPEDIA

Anna Genovese

Anna Genovese (formerly **Vernotico**, *née* **Giovaninna Petillo**; 28 October 1905[1] – January 1982) was an Italian-American businesswoman in the Italian mob and the second wife of mobster Vito Genovese of the Genovese crime family and the Costello crime syndicate.[2] She played a key role in Manhattan's drag bar scene in the middle of the 20th century.[3]

Contents

- Early life
- Marriage to Vito Genovese
- Business ventures
  - Club Caravan
  - Club 82
  - The 181 Club
- Separation from Vito Genovese
- Testimony in open court
- Dorothy Kilgallen reportage
- Sexuality
- Death
- Cultural references
- References
- External links

Early life

Genovese was born Giovaninna "Anna" Petillo,[4] the eldest child of Italian-Catholic immigrants, Aniello Vincenzo Petillo from Risigliano, Naples, and Concetta y Cassini Genovese, a cousin of Vito's. His brother Carmine lived with the Petillos after immigrating in 1910. Her siblings were Nicolas, Peitra, Ferdinand, and Mario Petillo. She has been erroneously listed as a sibling to mobster David Petillo; they were cousins. In the spring of 1924, at age 19, Genovese married her first husband, Gerard "Gerry" Vernotico.[4] According to Kate Harmon, Genovese's great niece, to whom the *Mob Queens* researchers spoke and have on record at 10:55 in Chapter 1 (https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/1-chapter-1-who-is-anna-genovese/id1474675655?i=1000447208711) of their podcast, Anna's marriage "was not looked upon kindly" by her family as Vernotico was considered a man of little means; a census record notes that he was a carpenter, though in reality he was a baker in New York City's Little Italy. In 1927, Genovese and Vernotico had a daughter, Marie, and moved a few blocks north of Anna's West Houston Street home to a tenement apartment next to an elevated train on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village. In a 1930 census, she is listed as a housewife, and Gerard as a carpenter,

though grand-niece Harmon states that Gerard was in fact a baker at a bakery in Little Italy and "had nothing." Court records show that at the same time, Anna had been working evenings in one of the clubs in the Washington Square Park neighborhood, near or in Greenwich Village.

Marriage to Vito Genovese

It is thought that Vito Genovese, a fourth cousin of Anna's,[5] was responsible for or involved with the murder of Gerard Vernotico in March 1932.[4] Two weeks later, Anna and Vito, whose first wife had also just died, were married.[4][5] Anna was six months pregnant. The couple's first luxury apartment was located at 43 Fifth Avenue,[6] a decadent Beaux Arts building, completed in 1905, with limestone pillars, a marble lobby, and wrought-iron balconies. The building would later be a place of residence for Marlon Brando.

Two years into their marriage, Vito killed gangster Ferdinand "The Shadow" Boccia.[7] A year later, in 1935, Vito bought Deep Cut, a 1928 mansion on a 40-acre (16 ha) property in Middletown Township, New Jersey.[8][9] Around the same time, New York Special Prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey started cracking down on organized crime, which bode poorly for Vito once Boccia's body was pulled from the Hudson River in 1937, as one of the hit men he hired for the job admitted to police that the commission had come from Vito.

Standing accused of the Boccia murder and other crimes, such as racketeering, Vito decided to flee the U.S.,[7] leaving the bulk of his business up to Anna. She was left to help formulate a source of revenue for the crime family at a time when most in the nation were struggling severely, as it was mid-Great Depression.

At this vital time, Anna's path intersected with an unexpected set of social phenomena: the repeal of Prohibition, but the institutionalization of "Gay Prohibition," during which it became common practice for law enforcement officers to stalk, harass, entrap, and arrest people in—or suspected to be in—the LGBTQ+ community. It was not uncommon for queer people or those suspected as such to be removed from bars, and, moreover, for bars to be raided when suspected homosexual activity was being condoned.[10] Bars could even lose their liquor licenses for serving gay patrons.[11] It was all the more risky and rebellious for Anna to create havens for queer people, but she took on the effort, ultimately effectively blocking police efforts to persecute the LGBTQ+ community, her means being the power and influence of the mob.[12]

Business ventures

While raising three children (her biological daughter with Gerard, Marie; Nancy, Vito's daughter with the late Donata Ragone; and Phillip, her son with Vito), Anna also ran nightclubs and gay and drag bars in Lower Manhattan,[3] whose profits she siphoned to the crime syndicate and Vito, exiled in Italy, who invested in Benito Mussolinin's fascist party and cocaine for Mussolini's son.

Club Caravan

Anna's first club, Club Caravan, opened in 1939 at 578 West Broadway.[13] Singers and other kinds of performers provided the entertainment, individuals like drag king Malvina Schwartz, also known as Buddy "Bubbles" Kent,[14] whose 1983 Lesbian Herstory Archives oral history chronicles her time spent there.

Anna later testified against her own club when she appeared in Freehold, New Jersey's Superior Court in 1953.[13] She also named Club Savannah and Moroccan Village, run by other mobsters, but the latter as one of her husband's hang-outs.[13]

Club 82

While Vito was in hiding abroad, Anna became hostess of Club 82, a gay bar located at 82 E. 4th St., between Second Avenue and the Bowery in Manhattan,[15] which started in October 1950. There, Anna cultivated a vibrant gay scene. The club's tagline was "Who's No Lady," and its drag revues featured both male and female impersonators. Kitt Russell, dubbed “America’s top femme mimic” by Walter Winchell,[16] hosted many of the shows, and countless acts performed in them, such as female impersonators Sonne Teal,[17] Kim Christy,[18] and Mel Michaels (http://sfbaytimes.com/public-performance-public-lives/).[19] Revues were long and elaborate,[16][20][21] replete with sets and costumes,[22][23] and with titles like *Sincapades of 1954*,[24] *A Vacation in Color*,[25] *Fun-Fair for '57*,[26] and *Time Out for Fun*.[27] According to Anna's eldest grandson, Frank, at 4:38 in Chapter 12 of *Mob Queens*, Anna supported show biz acts in their nascence, such as Barbra Streisand.[28]

The venue would later come under investigation with a potential loss of its liquor license, allegedly orchestrated by vindictive Vito to spite Anna.[13] In testifying against her own clubs, Anna stated that the Club 82 was gang-owned.[13] Her testimony ostensibly served to shift the blame from solely herself to her husband Vito's associates who had presided over, and allegedly monitored her activities running the club, while Vito was in exile in Italy.

The State Liquor Authority had previously revoked Club 82's liquor license on account of "disorderly conduct,"[13] which was code at the time for infractions involving things like serving alcohol to gay people, or people suspected of being gay.[29][30]

Anna left the club in the late 1960s in order to focus more on her family, but the venue lasted into the 1970s.

The 181 Club

Anna was a co-owner and proprietor, with gangster Steven Franse,[31] of the 181 Club,[32] known as "The East Side's Gayest Spot"[33] and "the homosexual Copacabana".[10] According to Franse's Supreme Court appellate testimony, his niece, Emily, was a part-time bookkeeper there.[34] It was a gay cabaret venue [32][35] and drag queens such as Buddy "Bubbles" Kent, who had worked at Anna's Caravan Club, also worked at the 181.[36] It would eventually lose its liquor license and be labeled "a hangout for perverts of both sexes" in reference to its gay performers and clientele.

Separation from Vito Genovese

By 1940, Vito had been in exile from the United States for seven years. Finally, he was extradited back to the States and was placed in custody, standing accused of the 1934 murder of Ferdinand "The Shadow" Boccia. However, after two key witnesses were found dead, the authorities had no choice but to free Vito, under which circumstances he was reunited with Anna. He then instigated a move from Manhattan to Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, where they lived luxuriously, but summarily ending Anna's club career.[7][37]

Anna had walked out on Vito in 1950. She then asked, in court, for $200 per week in maintenance, which meant alimony without the divorce. However, she dropped the divorce suit in 1951.

Testimony in open court

In order to escape the domestic violence she said she was experiencing at the hands of Vito,[38] Anna resumed her efforts to rid herself of him. On March 2, 1953, at the Freehold County Courthouse, Anna testified against Vito in court[39]—open court, an unheard-of move for any mob wife.[3][40] She asked the judge for $350/week[2][38] (approximately $160,000 per year, adjusted for inflation in 2019's money). Vito filed a counter-suit for divorce on the grounds of desertion.[2][38] Both claims were ultimately dismissed in the New Jersey Superior Court appellate division.[38]

Anna had testified that the family had been involved in narcotics trafficking, casinos, labor rackets, dog and horse-racing, and other criminal activities.[2] She claimed that she managed gambling ventures which generated an income of $30,000 per week.[40] She also stated that she was the only one with the combination to the family safe in New Jersey. She described her many trips to Italy, delivering large sums of money to Vito while he remained in exile. Additionally, Anna implicated other major mob figures like Frank Costello and Albert Anastasia;[2] as Anna's life would have been endangered due to her betrayal of so many dangerous people (she stated in her testimony that she had "been afraid to tell about Genovese's crime career in the past because he threatened her with death"[2]), it is surmised that she might have been promised law enforcement protections in exchange for her testimony. It is also theorized that due to her sexuality—bisexual or gay, socially and legally verboten at the time—she was being blackmailed[41][42][43] into revealing so much information of such weight; Vito possibly being aware of her predicament, he would have possibly, ironically, forgiven her. According to Anna Genovese, Vito Genovese ruled the Italian lottery in New York and New Jersey, bringing in over $1 million per year, owned four Greenwich Village night clubs, a dog track in Virginia, and other legitimate businesses.[44]

Amidst the revelations, it is believed that Anna also had the intention of publicly shaming Vito by insinuating that Frank Costello, his rival, had more power than he did, part of the proof being that she had faith Costello's branch would offer her protection once she left Vito. It is again surmised that Anna had immunity in testifying, as law enforcement and the courts would not have allowed her to walk free after admitting her role in the copious crimes committed.

In counter-testimony, Vito's witnesses attempted to discredit Anna's character. She was characterized as an "untrustworthy, hot-tempered" woman who slept with other women. As it was the height of the Red Scare and Lavender Scare in the United States, the characterization of Anna's behavior would serve to undermine her claims.

Dorothy Kilgallen reportage

Dorothy Kilgallen, the most syndicated newspaper columnist at the time of the trial, began reporting on the case, recording live with "If I were Mrs. Vito Genovese, I'd be awful careful crossing streets." It turned out that Kilgallen was close with gangster Frank Costello, a rival of Vito Genovese. According to Kilgallen's biographer, Mark Shaw, the friendship was marked by Costello gifting Kilgallen with a diamond cross, which Kilgallen's hairdresser corroborated. It is speculated that Costello gifted Kilgallen so she would, as a favor to him, "warn" Anna—through her newspaper column and other outlets she presided over—that she needed to stop spilling mob business publicly—whether in court or otherwise—or face consequences. That, or switch allegiances from the Genovese crime family to the Costello syndicate.

Sexuality

According to drag king Malvina Schwartz, also known as Buddy "Bubbles" Kent, who worked in Anna's clubs,[36] has stated in her Lesbian Herstory Archives interview that Anna was "definitely into the girls."[32] Additional insight had been given by Henry "Adrian" Oranco, a drag queen who worked under Anna's supervision at Club 82. He has stated that Anna was romantically involved with a drag king named Duke, whose given name was Jackie. As a token of love, Jackie, Anna's "girlfriend," as Oranco calls her in Chapter 9 of *Mob Queens*, received a Cadillac.[45] In Chapter 6 of the *Mob Queens* podcast, Anna's granddaughter, Mia, confirms that the two were romantically involved, Mia having met Jackie the day that Anna died.[46] Also confirmed by Mia was Anna's romantic involvement with a woman named Gwen Saunders, a cashier at one of Anna's clubs.

Death

At the end of her life, Anna worked at the upper-crust Warwick Hotel in guest relations. According to Anna's granddaughter, Mia, Cary Grant was living at the hotel at the time and he and Anna became good friends. Mia speaks to this point at 5:23 in Chapter 12 of *Mob Queens*.[28]

Thirteen years later, in January 1982, Anna had, in the words of Mia in *Mob Queens* Chapter 12, "a very significant stroke." She was hospitalized at St. Vincent's, where she died surrounded by her lover, Jackie, daughter Marie, and granddaughter, Mia[47]

Anna was buried next to her ex-husband, Vito, in the Genovese Family vault in St. John Cemetery, Queens, New York.[28]

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Genovese is the subject of the 12-episode podcast *Mob Queens* (2019), hosted by writers Jessica Bendinger and Michael Seligman, who had researched her life from 2014 to 2018 after discovering a stash of old letters in 2014.[3]

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External links

Mob Queens podcast (https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/stitcher/mob-queens)

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CRIME FAMILY NEWS FEATURED POSTS

THE DRAG QUEEN KILLERS: LITTLE DAVEY PETILLO & CHARLES GAGLIODOTTO

NCS | 4 YEARS AGO

SHARE

In Al D'Arco's biography, Mob Boss, he spoke about a mobster that he worked for by the name of **Little Davey Petillo**. A mobster who he met while incarcerated in prison, who had started out working as bodyguard for **Al Capone** before he later began working for **Lucky Luciano**.

His partner in crime was **Charles "Chalutz" Gagliodotto** (who he would later go on to kill on the streets of Queens).

Charles "Chalutz" Gagliodotto (1908 – 1968)

Charles Gagliodotto

The two were labeled as the most vicious and intimidating killers in mob history. Why? Because they were clever and violent, so much so that they used to dress in drag (which they would do often to get close to their target) – who would expect a couple of old women of killing?

One story Al D'Arco,the former acting boss of the Luchese Family, commented on, which was also confirmed by another informant, was a time they attended a funeral…

Both Petillo and Gagliodotto were dressed head to toe in black, complete with a black veil. The occasion was a funeral, and the mobster attending it had no idea he was about to be next. They both climbed into the funeral car and shot the mobs before making a quick exit.

Al D'Arco described Gagliodotto as:

> ***"hooded eyes, hair gone grey, and often with a pale, ghostly pallor. He looked like a pint-sized Boris Karlof but no one dared to kid him..... He was a mad hatter. A stone killer. People were deathly scared of him."***

Gagliodotto's Death

The police had thought that Gagliodotto died of a natural causes on a street in Queens. However, that wasn't the case, informants gave word to the FBI that he had been strangled to death by a plastic bag. The reason was simple, Gagliodotto was starting to kill or plan hits on nearly everyone and this hit on him came weeks after he he over-stepped the line when he killed two of his partners. Once mobsters lose control like this and put fear into everyone – they have to go.

Little Davey Petillo (1908 – 1983)

Little Davey Petillo

Petillo started his criminal career working for Giose Aiello. When Aiello disappeared both Petillo and Gagliodotto joined forces with the Luciano family.He would eventually find himself on the wrong end of that infamous 1936 prostitution sting in New York which also saw Lucky Luciano take a hefty prison sentence.

Luciano as we all know managed to strike a deal with the government to protect the coastline from German attacks, and was deported to Italy in 1946 for his help with the War effort. Petillo however was in prison until June 1955 and resented the fact that Lucky didn't include his name in the deal that saw his release 11 years prior.On leaving prison, **Vito Genovese** the underboss of the Luciano family put Petillo in charge of a 24 man crew which he would run for over 20 years.

Little Davey Petillo's Death

David Petillo collapsed and died on December 28th, 1983, in Malaga after being on the run for nearly 2 years following the killing of his nephew in 1982.

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A Man Alone: The story of Genovese Family mobster David Petillo, a vicious killer also known as “The Fag Hitman”

Posted by Gangsters Inc. on February 9, 2017 at 5:00

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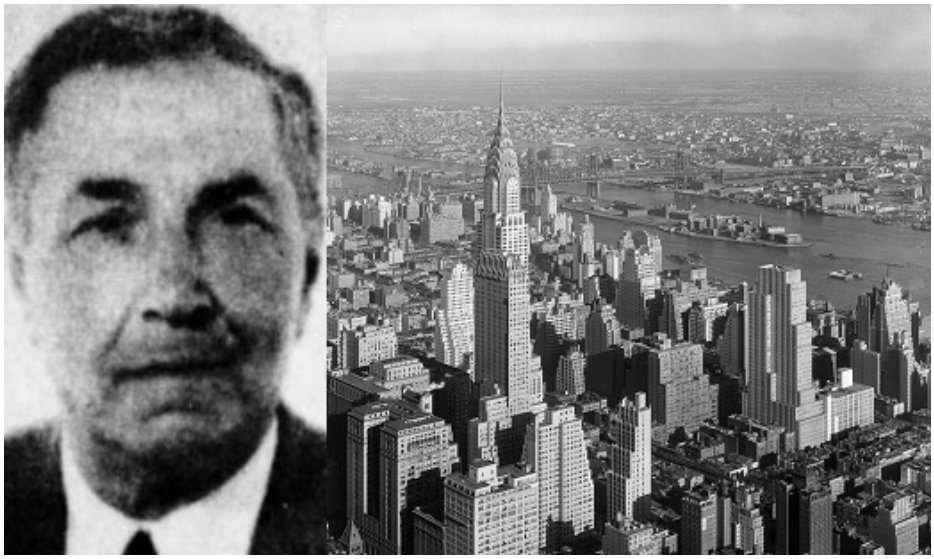

By Thom L. Jones

> *"The only mystery in life is why kamikaze pilots wore helmets."*
>
> *- **Al McGuire***

Then again, as Shakespeare’s Horatio said to Hamlet, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’

Unless it was something as strange and mysterious as this: a story about two men, both members of the New York Mafia, who, according to mob folklore, at times wore drag while they killed their targets. Both part of the same crime family. Hard to believe. Like so much of the weird and puzzling mythology that makes up the history of New York’s Cosa Nostra.

One of them was arrested when he was eighteen, for the murder of a police officer. He stood in the basement of a wine cellar on Rivington Street, near The Bowery, and shot the cop who was searching the premises after the killer and his friends had tried to rob the place.

It’s also claimed that he worked as a hit man for the Genovese crime family and that at times, he dressed as a woman, carrying a pistol in a purse when stalking his victims. Neat way to sneak up on a target. His peers referred to him as “the fag hit man.”

He was a tiny-tot, barely five feet even. Without the heels. About the size of a jockey. Little guys in the mob, at times, became the big ones. Salvatore D’Aquila who emerged in the early 1920s as the head of what we now call the Gambino Family, was himself, apparently, a mere five-two. As was Tommy Luchese who ran his own Mafia family which still carries his name.

It was reported that our fag hit-man died of a heart attack on a street in Queens. He did. But it was exacerbated by the fact that he

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was maybe strangled to death by a plastic bag on Prince Street, in Manhattan, earlier in the evening.

The illusory, almost surreal life of Charles “Chalutz” Gagliodotto, is a confusing series of images that come and go through the sixty years he spent on this earth. It’s as bewildering as why he is nicknamed in Hebrew for a “pioneer, or immigrant to Israel.” (Some sources spell this as Chalootz or Chaloots and even Schalutz). One FBI report refers to him as ‘Charlie’ although this is the only instance I could find of a deviation from his given name. There is a lot more we do not know about him than we do. Not unlike Hamlet’s soliloquy to Horatio.

Al D’Arco, the former acting boss of the Luchese Family, described him as “hooded eyes, hair gone grey, and often with a pale, ghostly pallor. He looked like a pint-sized Boris Karlof but no one dared to kid him.....He was a mad hatter. A stone killer. People were deathly scared of him.” (1)

Joseph Valachi, the Genovese soldier who turned informant in 1963, identified him as a soldier in the Gambino crime family adding, even more, mystery to a man who at this distance, seems to be more a conundrum than reality. Valachi, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the New York Mafia, may well have gotten his lines crossed on this one. Which is understandable. He joined them around 1930 and had been part of three different families by the time he found his niche in what we now call the Genovese towards the end of 1931. There is no record as to when Gagliodotto joined the mob, or whose crew he served in. He may in fact, have never been a soldier, but only an associate.

An FBI report dated February 2nd, 1965, states:

“Gagliodotto, FBI No 59036, is a prominent member of the Genovese family.”

“Chalutz,” a year older, was close to David Petillo, at times called Betillo, and variously referred to as Little Davey, Little Davie or just Little Davy, an associate of Charlie Luciano, often claimed to be the leader of what we know today as The Genovese Family, and one of the founders of the post 1931 New York Mafia, as a proper noun. Gagliodotto and Petillo had both started their criminal careers working for a mysterious mobster called Giose Aiello who controlled an area in Manhattan’s 4th Ward on the lower east side in the Cherry Street area, When Aiello died or retired (no one seemingly knows what happened to him) the two friends merged with what became the Luciano/Genovese branch of Cosa Nostra. There was another man in this gang, Angelo Tuminaro, who in the future, would become one of New York’s major narcotic traffickers. For whatever reason, he chose a different path and became one of the Luchese family’s soldiers. He stayed close to Petillo in the years ahead.

Now here’s the thing:

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According to FBI files, Petillo, also did it as a closet queen! He dressed up as a woman, when he was a teenager and went out to kill for his pals in the Mob.

His nickname, “Little Davy,” indicated he was height challenged, although, at five-six, he was a veritable giant next to his pal “Chalutz.” There were times, it seems, when Davy and “Chalutz” did the job in tandem. One dressed as a woman, the other accompanying him as his male partner.

On one classic occasion, they shot their victim as he rode in a car as part of a funeral procession. A man dying on his way to celebrate death. Another time, it is alleged, Petillo worked as a shoe-shine boy, or maybe girl, when his target came out of a social club and sat down, Davy opened his shine box, took out a gun, and shot the man dead. Polished him off as they say. From what little can be gleaned from their history, this cross-dressing killing almost certainly took place when they were both adolescents or at least into their early 20s. None of these murders were officially linked to either of them, although Petillo had a lengthy criminal record. Between 1919 and 1934 he was arrested at least seventeen times using nine different aliases, on charges that included gambling, vagrancy, armed robbery and possession of opium in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

In the teeming streets of Manhattan’s Little Italy in those early days of the 20th century, locals knew all about men who craved to be women or at least dressed as them, and referred to them as finnochio, (2) a term also used to describe men who were gay. The word eventually morphed into the English language as ‘fairy.’ In 1908, Vito Lorenzo’s saloon on Canal Street, New York, frequented by these people, was charged by the police as being a “fairy place.”

Gay sex was apparently prevalent among adolescent boys in the street gangs of Italian neighborhoods from which the Mafia often recruited. (3) There may well have been a considerable lavender-streak running through the lower echelon of soldiers and associates in those days. Many of these young boys came from Naples where male prostitution was rife in the latter part of the 19th Century. Maybe it’s still active in today’s Mafia.

Aldo Gionta, Luciano Aviello, and Ugo Gabriele aka “Kitty,” are three Camorristas (the Mafia of Naples) arrested in recent years, all with a penchant for wearing women’s clothing and make-up. One in fact, underwent a sex change operation while in prison in 2014. In 2009, Robert Mormando, a soldier in New York’s Gambino Family, admitted to being gay. John D’ Amato, head of the New Jersey-based DeCavalcante Mafia Family was shot dead by one of his soldiers for being homosexual.

Petillo went down with Charlie Luciano on the infamous prostitution sting in New York, June 1936, that sent them both to prison for so many years they would never be young again. Luciano was pardoned and deported to Italy in 1946, and Petillo

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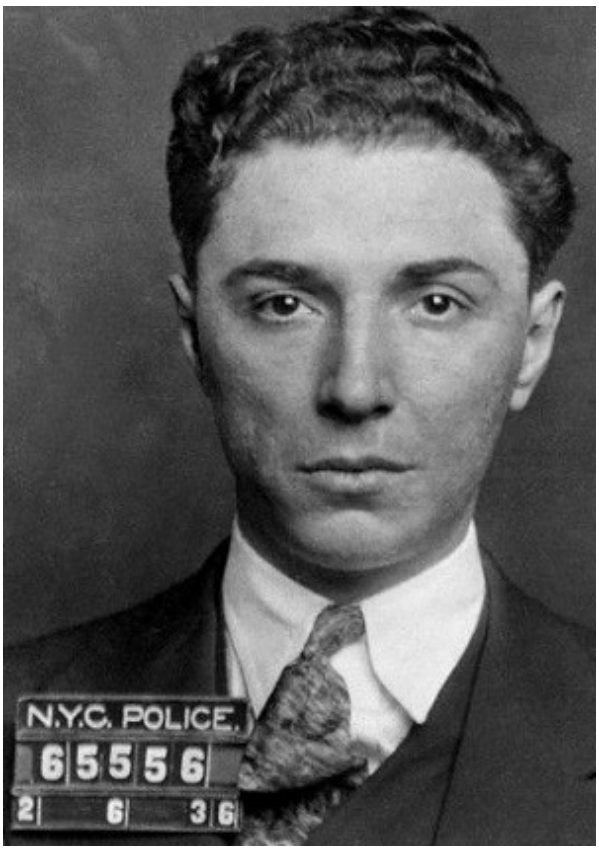
eventually was released in June 1955. He afterwards held an abiding hatred towards Luciano, claiming he was a rat to cooperate with the government, and an even bigger one for leaving Davy to stew in prison another ten years, claiming he could have easily bundled a two-for-one deal when he was stringing the authorities along on the racket to protect America’s coastline against possible Nazi invasion.

- **Read:** Lucky’s Luck: How Charlie Luciano got out of jail and passed go

On his arrest in June 1936, Petillo was living at 200 West 16th Street in the Chelsea district of Lower Manhattan. His arrest docket showed him as five-six, one thirty-three pounds, curly brown hair and ruddy complexion. His occupation was listed as “concessionaire.” A seller of goods or services.



In his mug shot (right), he wears a trendy, three-piece suit, a long-collared white shirt, and a patterned tie. He stares at the camera with a petulant smirk on his face, his perfect mouth, perfectly formed; his wavy, burnished hair, brushed high off his forehead. Although FBI records report his skin as “ruddy,” a crime reporter at the time, claimed “he had a face as white as a dead fish’s belly.” But it’s the eyes that get you. They look through the camera lens and beyond into a place that would be waiting for him forty-six years in the future. A darkness more than night.

On leaving prison, Vito Genovese, the current family underboss, (Frank Costello had run Luciano’s crime family since 1936) allocated David Petillo to the twenty-four-man crew of consigliere, Michele Miranda. He was in good company in this regime, working alongside such alumni as Frank Tieri, (a future family boss), Pete DeFeo, Socks Lanza, and Eli Zaccardi. Little Davy would spend the next twenty-five years (except when he was back in prison) running drugs, loan sharking, particularly in the garment district,

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and controlling part of the pornography business for the family. They were all a tough crew, in what has been often referred to as a crime family that was The Ivy League of America’s Mafia.

He stayed, on release, initially, with his sister Clara, who lived in Babylon, on Long Island, and confirmed over the next few years, to his probation officer, a number of ‘jobs’ he worked. These involved a scrap yard, a motor company, a waste paper company and a tailor's shop.

The question that begs an answer, is how could this mob, filled with hard-edged men so tough they could cough sandpaper, nurture two queer killers at the same time?

As Sharon L. Alder the inspirational author once said, “Some stories have to be written because no one would believe the absurdity of it all.”

Bill Feathers, the well-known Mafia historian, has this to say about Petillo’s close friend Gagliodotto:

“Sources include both the Valachi [1963] report and the FBI dead by 1975 lists.

A much-feared member, known to have carried out several murders for the family (Genovese). A close associate of David Petillo, they were both small and somewhat effeminate. Indeed, they were rumored to have dressed as women to get close to their murder victims. Had a long criminal record, starting in 1923.

By the1960s, he was into narcotics trafficking, a crime officially banned, but unofficially tolerated, by Cosa Nostra as it was such a huge money-earner for them. However, he over-stepped the line when he killed two of his partners, one, a relation of a veteran Mafioso, Angelo Tuminaro. After he appealed to the Genovese Family administration, for revenge for the murder of his younger brother, Gagliodotto was killed in 1968, possibly by Petillo.”

In the strange and convoluted world of the Mafia, chances are, if you’re getting killed the hard way, a close friend is close by.

If that is how it did happen, I assume Petillo had help as he was a little guy; a lot bigger than “Chalutz,” (right) but no Tarzan. Death by strangulation is generally relatively quiet but extremely hazardous to undertake, especially one on one, and in September 1968, when Gagliodotto was killed, Petillo was sixty years old and in indifferent health.

Jerry Capeci the mob reporter and author, claims that Petillo did the job while his nephew, Edward “Chuckie” Vassallo #, held the victim in a bear hug. “Chuckie” was big and strong, but it didn’t help him when twelve years later, on February 4th, 1980, his uncle had him perforated by some of the seventeen bullets fired through

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the bamboo shades on the bedroom window of his home as he was watching television while his common-law wife, Frances “Cookie” Maguire, sat painting her toe-nails. “Chuckie” was lying on the bed and according to one of the three killers, when they shot him “he bounced around a lot.” He was hit twice in the head, once in the leg, once in the chest, and another round blew off one of his fingers. He lingered in Point Pleasant Hospital and eventually died from his wounds late in the evening of February 14th. Blood is thicker than water, except when it isn’t. A paradox that is ubiquitous in the strange and wonderful world that “Little Davy” inhabited.

Petillo had stayed close to Angelo “Patchy” Tuminaro since their boyhood days on the Lower East Side. Close enough to be partners with him in a basement gay night club called The Sewer, at 9-11, East 16th Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Tuminaro, a soldier in the Luchese Mafia Family, was one of the alleged ring-leaders in the infamous French Connection drug investigation of the 1960s. Another height challenged gangster at the ubiquitous five-two, he was also the man who would link Petillo into the death of Gagliodotto.

Degrees of separation never existed closer or stronger than in the ranks of the Mafia.

- **Read:** The Man Who Stole the French Connection

Petillo was knee-deep in the ‘junk’ business, and a prime target of The Federal Bureau of Narcotics. He was also under the watchful eye of the FBI agents in New York. He had only three years of freedom from the prostitution sting when he was re-arrested for violation of his parole and went back to prison in 1958, for a bunch of added years behind bars. If anyone lived a life of quiet desperation it was “Little Davy.” Then again, if he did kill all those people while dressing as a woman, he was never indicted on any of them!

On one occasion, when he was interviewed by an agent of the FBI, in his rented apartment on Park Avenue, Manhattan, he leaned forward on his chair, grasped the Fed by the hands, and with tears streaming down his face, begged him to get his wife to stop harassing him. Phyllis Ann Musillo, was more than forty years his

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junior when they married in November 1969 and then honeymooned in Italy. Born and raised on Mulberry Street, she was described as “tall, with long, dark hair, elegant, good-looking, well-mannered, a pleasant and attractive woman and full of energy;” she must have been a handful at the best of times. But she stuck with him until the end, (his first common law wife, Madeleine Popalardo, had died in 1950, while he was serving his time with Luciano.) which came under the winter sun, in Spain, of all places.

Like characters out of a Hemingway novel, Davy and Phyllis would come to the end of the road, with the winner takes nothing. (4)

David Petillo collapsed and died on December 28th, 1983, in Malaga. He and Phyllis had traveled across the world in the twenty-two months since they fled New Jersey, following the killing of his nephew, moving first to Mexico and then staying in Hawaii, Hong Kong, Bali, Singapore, Greece, and Germany before their last stop on the Mediterranean coast. At the end, he was calling himself James J. Pilone, the name he had used in the hotel registry, one of the dozen aliases he adopted through his life of crime.

Phyllis brought him home to New York and buried him in St Johns, Queens, (5) the biggest mob necropolis in America. A wit wondered if he was buried in a dress.

It’s almost Kafkaesque in its implication, that two men born a few miles apart, in the same city, would one day come together as friends and partners in a criminal enterprise that was beyond the comprehension of the average American, and would both begin their careers in the most bizarre way and continue to be linked until one killed the other.

A C.I. (confidential informant) had told his FBI handler in 1960 that Petillo and Gagliodotto were “two of the most feared members of the Italian syndicate.” He said that it was common knowledge among the ‘hoodlum element’ that they had killed between twenty and thirty men in Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and New York. This is maybe, the first of a number of similar reports that probably forms the ambiguous basis for the legend of these two shadowy images from the past. A lot of street intelligence on the Mafia that formed the working knowledge of agencies like the FBI and the FBN (Federal Bureau of Narcotics) came into the system this way. Some was verifiable, much of it was questionable, but it was all recorded and filed away for reference, as the agencies slowly built up their mob knowledge over the years. Some of it was spot-on as will be seen as this story unfolds.

“Little Davy” was allegedly, “straightened out” or made into the Mafia by Al Capone. Which would have been interesting as there is no evidence that Al himself was inducted into the Cosa Nostra. Chicago was never referred to as a “family” of the Mafia, but as “The Outfit,” or “The Syndicate.” Simply a bunch of crooks without the mystique of the Mafia to comfort them. In 1962 an FBI informant

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confirmed to his handler that Petillo had been inducted by 1931 or earlier.

According to Nicolo Gentile, a Sicilian Mafioso who worked and travelled in America during this early period of Mafia activity in America, Capone was “given the privilege of joining the Giuseppe Masseria Family” for his financial help and support during the New York underworld war of 1930-31.’

Just how he joined, we do not know. Did he shake hands? Take the oath? Write a cheque? (6)

In addition, Petillo had one brother who was a police officer in Naples, and a brother-in-law who worked for the American IRS (Inland Revenue Service). Definitely a no-no as far as the so-called ‘rules’ of Cosa Nostra applied when considering applicants. Then again, they changed the rules whenever it suited the boss of the time.

Thomas Dewey, the crusading New York District Attorney, claimed Petillo came back to New York from Chicago sometime in 1931 after spending 5 years there working as Capone’s bodyguard. Lucky Luciano confirmed this in his courtroom testimony at his trial in 1936 for running compulsory prostitution, a violation of section 2460 of The Penal Code. (7).

At the trial, Chief Court Justice McCook accused Petillo of “being Luciano’s chief and most ruthless aide deserving no consideration from the court.” It was also alleged in 1958, that Petillo had been “Luciano’s chief agent in the narcotics trade on the East Coast.”

Davy was of course never this high in ranking in Luciano’s crime family. Men like Frank Costello, Willie Moretti, Vito Genovese, Joe Adonis, Anthony Carfano and Meyer Lansky were much more significant, although Petillo’s importance in supervising the thirty or so men who managed the prostitution syndicate of an estimated 2000 whores, generating in excess of $10 million annually, should not be undervalued.

At the age of 42, Petillo’s close friend and ally in crime, “Chalutz” Gagliodotto was arrested on September 21, 1949, by a squad of the NYPD Narcotics Bureau for trafficking drugs. Along with Michael Cottone and George Strivaelli, they were observed exchanging packages and one of them handing a parcel into a car parked on the corner of Mott and Spring Street, to the driver, Gagliodotto. The three men had been under surveillance by the Bureau for nine weeks.

In May 1960, Petillo and Gagliodotto were among twenty-nine suspects who were indicted by a grand jury on drug trafficking charges. This was the major bust that would send such mob luminaries as Carmine Galante, John Ormento and Anthony Mirra to prison for long stretches. Petillo had been tracked by law

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enforcement agents and seen meeting with various alleged drug dealers in bars and clubs in New York and he was arrested in late June 1958. The surveillance that led to this massive drug bust had actually been instigated to secure evidence that Little Davy was in breach of his parole conditions. Law enforcement unknowingly hit the jackpot with this one!

On February 4th, 1965, Charles Gagliodtto was one of 14 men arrested by federal agents, after 19 had been indicted in Brooklyn with running a $90 million drug ring. In 2016 terms that’s $682 million. Among the pack were Frank “Chico” Gangi and Frank “Frankie Boy” Tuminaro. With appeals and the usual legal obfuscation, the case dragged on for years, with most of the accused out on bail. It was long enough for “Chico” and “Frankie Boy” to find out the hard way, that you did not cross “Chalutz.”

In the early summer of 1968, Gangi and Tuminaro were involved with Gagliodotto in a narcotics deal that went sideways. The upshot was that “Chalutz” came out if it $17000 out of pocket, and was very annoyed, It really, really riled him. His dispute with the two men eventually went to a mob ‘sit-down’ between the Genovese and Luchese families. Frankie Boy was the younger brother of Angelo Tuminaro who at that time was out of prison following his sentence for bail-jumping on the 1960 drug indictment that had also snared Galiodotto and Petillo, and Frank was helping to run his brother’s drug business. He had taken on this job following the arrest of Angelo’s nephew, Patsy Fuca, as a result of The French Connection case. The ‘sit-down’ confirmed that Gagliodotto forfeit his claim. During this period, he was not only trafficking in drugs but using them himself-injecting heroin and smoking opium. On the street they called it ‘kicking the gong.’ (1) Unpredictable at the best of times, he was now seriously dangerous. Whatever the outcome, in his strange life, guilt was a luxury he never had time for.

Late on the Friday evening of August 9th, “Chalutz” invited Gangi and Tuminaro to a social club near Mott and Elizabeth Streets, not far from his apartment at 55 East Houston. After pouring them a drink, he shot them both in the head. One shot each. All that was needed. The body bags were ready, and he dumped them in the boot of a car and headed for Upstate New York where he had a holiday cottage near Monticello, in Sullivan County. Near a small wood, off Roosa Gap Road, north of Bloomingburg, he parked, and dumped the victims. About a week later, on August 15th, two boys attending a nearby American Legion camp, attracted by the stench, stumbled across the remains in the early morning. Two black, steaming plastic sacks, covered in flies.

Angelo Tuminaro went to his friends in the Genovese Family and demanded retribution for the murder of his brother. It was granted. Maybe the administration had finally realized what kind of liability “Chalutz” had become. As is the way in the Mafia underworld, the hit was awarded to one of his close friends.

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Late on the night of Wednesday, August 21, his violent life came to a violent end.

Perhaps like characters in an *ombres chinoises* marionette shadow play, the three men may have danced a macabre pirouette of death, their silhouettes capering across the night-lit ground as “Chalutz” fought to stay alive and Petillo and his nephew made sure he didn’t. Like Thalia and Melpomene, the muses of theatre, the two killers made sure their production would play tribute to the tragedy of the night witnessed only by the sentinel moon.

Two informants, known to their FBI handlers as NY-77 and NY-238, advised that Gagliodotto had been murdered on or near Prince Street, in Lower Manhattan. For an unknown reason, the body had then been moved and deposited on the sidewalk outside 2110 33rd Street in Astoria, Queens, about 12 miles away.

Just where the killing happened is unknown for sure. If it was in the Prince Street area, its removal across the East River to Queens may have simply been to confuse the authorities. Just why that particular spot was chosen to deposit the body also remains a mystery. It worked, at first. Chalutz’s corpse, neatly dressed, with wallet, watch and pinky ring intact, seemed to be simply an elderly man who had collapsed and died of natural causes. Which was the finding of the hospital pathologist at the Queens Hospital in Jamaica, who then released the body to Gagliodotto’s relatives.

When Special Agent in Charge, Richard Baker of the FBI, received the tips off’s regarding the murder of “Chalutz,” he contacted the Chief of Detectives of the NYPD, and on the evening of August 24th a police squad removed the dead mobster as he was being waked at the Pasquale Ala Vecchia Funeral Home at 273 Mott Street, next door to the old St Patrick’s Cathedral. Maybe his best friend, Little Davy Petillo, was sitting there at the time, thinking perhaps what they say about sympathy: it’s in the dictionary between shit and syphilis. And wondering on reflection, why they just hadn’t dumped “Chalutz” in some wiseguy ossuary.

The body was re-examined on August 25th by Milton Helpern, New York’s Chief Medical Examiner, at times referred to as “Sherlock Holmes with a microscope,” and “the world’s most famous coroner,” at his administrative complex at 520 1st Avenue, Kips Bay, Lower Manhattan, who concluded that Gagliodotto had, in fact, died of strangulation and not a heart attack.

Law enforcement agencies pondered if the killing of Frank Tuminaro who was linked into one Cosa Nostra family by a man who was a soldier in another one who was then himself murdered was the start of a mob war in the city. It wasn’t of course. Simply a case of good housekeeping to make sure that would never happen. And as with almost every Mafia killing, no one would ever pay the piper.

Gangsters Inc. Jul 29
252 0

Mafia Hitmen: New York’...
Gangsters Inc. Jul 22
412 0

The Numbers Racket: O...
Gangsters Inc. Jul 18
134 0

Fighting the Italian Mafi...
Gangsters Inc. Jul 11
257 0

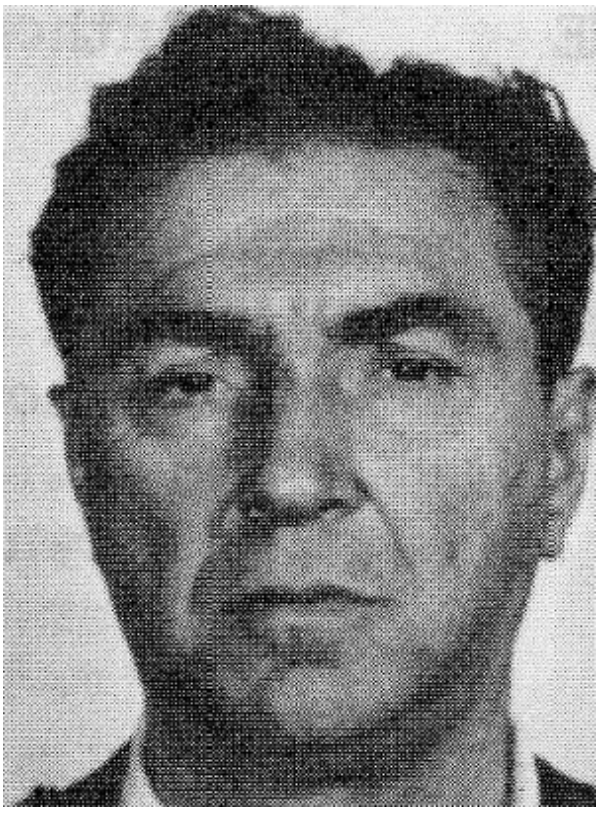
View All

With “Chalutz” gone, the gang that congregated at the social club (which had been Luciano’s office back in the day, before his world ended in 1936,) at 121 Mulberry Street where he had hung out, probably collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Men whose psychopathic nihilistic values would terrify a normal human being could tremble in his presence. Stone-killers have that effect on people. A man with a stare that could make faces bleed, he had been just too crazy for even the most hardened mobsters in Little Italy. As mad as a box of frogs comes to mind.

Petillo, who had taken over the club (originally a butcher shop run by the famous Esposito family,) from “Joe the Wop” Gennaro, a capo in the Gambino Family, after he died, carried on running his various business scams, the main one being loan sharking. It was estimated that he had almost a million on the street, predominantly invested in the garment district, (an area between West 35th Street to the south, 42nd Street to the north, and wedged in between 7th and 9th Avenues,) and at the usurious rates he levied, there must have been many thousands pouring in each week. He was also trafficking drugs, like almost everyone else at the club. One of Davy’s runners, a young Jewish kid called Frankie Salzberg, who Petillo had met and cultivated friendship with while in prison, was found dead on Aug 9th, 1968, in Van Cortland Park in the Bronx. He had been stabbed multiple times in the face. The rumor at the club was that he had been holding back on making payments to Davy and that was the end of him.

Petillo allegedly handled the contract personally. (1)

Al D’Arco remembered Little Davy (right) as a man with a ferocious temper and strange habits. A three-pack a day man, who never seemed to be without a cigarette, he was at the same time a health-nut who bought vitamin pills in bulk. Even with his numerous medical problems, he delighted in demonstrating his upper body strength by dropping to the floor without warning and doing sixty push-ups, a legacy of his many years in prison. He drove like a man



possessed, slouching down in the seat so that from outside, it seemed the car was driving itself. (1)

A mobster who had spent time with him in Great Meadows Prison in New York State, claimed “Davy was a funny guy to be around. He was full of jokes and made everyone laugh. He was a great chess player. The best at Comstock. You just wouldn’t have thought he was a gangster.” Not everyone was as effusive in their praise for the little gangster. Sid Feder the writer, thought of him as, “slime innocuous in appearance.”

With all of that, he was also a man with troubling medical problems. An associate remembered that he was somewhat deaf and stuttered. Which may well have been the least of his health worries.

When he was released from prison, in May 1967, (following the 1958 drug bust he spent nine more years behind bars, some of the time in the same correction facility, Clinton, in Dannemora, Upstate New York, where he had served part of his first twenty years with Luciano,) he lived at the Holland Hotel on West 42nd Street. A notorious den of whores, pimps, loan sharks and drug dealers, Little Davy must have felt he was home away from home. The New York Times once described it as “a kiddie park designed by the Marquis de Sade.”

The Feds kept a close watch on him over the next few years. They never knew just how close they were to a man who was prepared to do anything to extract revenge against the bureau.

Petillo could have been, according to Al D'Arco, one of the major terrorists of 20th Century America (1).

Because of his abiding hatred towards the FBI, he engineered a plot that would have involved filling a garbage truck with dynamite and having it parked and detonated near the FBI headquarters building at 201 East 69 Street Manhattan on 'Unity Day,' in June 1970. This was a celebration organized by another Mafioso, Joe Colombo, in his own personal vendetta against the bureau for persecuting his biological family. He had founded the Italian-American Civil Rights Movement which was to hold its inaugural rally at Colombo Circus that would be attended by 15,000 people. Fortunately for the FBI, wiser heads prevailed, and Little Davy abandoned his hair-brain scheme.

FBI agents may have been on his tail, but it didn’t stop him wheeling and dealing. He often did drug transactions through one of Vito Genovese’s gay night bars called The 82 Club on East 47th Street. It was the haunt of celebrities, including film stars, such as the infamous Errol Flynn, who was once observed when under the influence, playing the club’s piano with his legendary penis. Another scam Petillo operated involved the theft and resale of international airline tickets, an operation he used himself in a big way. Between May 1970 and October 1971, he flew to India, Japan,

Portugal, Denmark, Italy and Australia. He probably used these trips as vacation time. His visits to Pakistan and Thailand in the same period were maybe involved in one his other mob activities- drug trafficking.

In January 1970, on his honeymoon in Italy, he visited a property, the Petillo family owned at Via Nicotera 103, in Acciaroli, a small fishing village on the Cilento coast in Salerno Province, south of Naples. His first visit to Italy was apparently in June 1932, when he sailed to Naples aboard the MS Vulcania. His initial passport had been issued only two days before he left New York.

(Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway visited the small, seaside town in 1953, and met his ‘Old Man’ here. They say that he based the character of Santiago in his novel *The Old Man and the Sea* on a local fisherman called Antonio Massarone. Which is interesting, as the book was published in 1952.)

The family home, a large, three-story granite house, with acres of olive groves, one back from a pristine beach, was valued in 1973 at $150,000 (Almost $900,000 by to-days measure). In addition to this property, Petillo apparently owned two other buildings, consisting of an apartment block and four retail outlets in Acciaroli, all supervised and managed by one of his cousins who lived in the area. He was probably inspecting the property again on another overseas trip, because in August 1972, he admitted himself into a private hospital near Pattano, about a one hour drive to the east. The FBI believed from their information, that he may have suffered a heart attack or a stroke, although this was never confirmed by the hospital.

The Casa Di Cura, the Corbellis Treatment Clinic, assessed him as suffering from dementia, confusion, behavioral disturbance, memory loss, fixation and spastic laughter, symptoms that may have been triggered by his many years of imprisonment. One of the great ironies of his life is that this hospital was located in the town of Vallo della Lucania. Charlie Luciano's given name was Salvatore Lucania. The man he hated so badly because of his perceived grievances that kept him locked up long after his boss was granted freedom back in 1946, led him back to a revelation that no doubt sent shock waves through the conception of his own mortality.

After his marriage to Phyllis Musillo, Davy and his wife moved to a trendier area, and rented an apartment, number 16 G for $405 a month at 30 Park Avenue in the Murray Hill neighborhood, close to midtown Manhattan. He called himself Charles Snow in the tenancy agreement which he signed on February 1st, 1969. For whatever reason, he maintained his room at the Holland Hotel until May 1st and also apartment 1003 he had rented since July 1968, at The Beaux Art Hotel, on West 44th Street.

Maybe they were simply bolt-holes he could use to avoid the endless law enforcement surveillance he knew he was under.

Philip “Benny Squint” Lombardo, the Genovese boss during this period, apparently elevated him to the rank of capo or crew chief, in the early 1970s according to FBI informants, although the bureau always referred to him as a soldier in the family.

Mr. and Mrs. Petillo lived on Park Avenue until January 1973. He was interviewed by agents of the FBI on the 10th and 15th of the month, and on each occasion, it was reported that he would break into tears and become very emotional. His wife advised the agents that Petillo had suffered a stroke while in Italy the previous year and that his memory was impaired.

Davy and his wife left the New York area, (after they had flown to Italy but been deported back to America the same day, January 22nd, 1973,) and may have moved to Long Island. By April 1974, they were renting a house in New Jersey. This was at 501 North Lake Shore Drive in Brick Township. Interestingly, this property was owned by Anthony Barres, who was Chief of Police in Newark until 1977, although it was sub-leased to Petillo through a man called Ross Lee Cooper who was the tenant by deed.

Little Davy had nine years left. He proceeded to make the most of it. Like a snake shedding its skin to find a second wind, he was off on the chase.

From his earliest days in the mob, he was linked into sexual deviancy. Dressing as a woman, rumors of his bisexual activities, helping to organize and run the biggest prostitution ring in America’s largest city, trafficking drugs through gay bars and clubs. The common denominator seemed to be sex and perversion, with drugs as the appetizer, although always with an edge. The edge being power and money. He allegedly dressed like a woman so he could get close to the targets he had to kill. Running the biggest whore house in town was all about the cash. Doing drugs through entertainment spots that catered to people with ‘alternative’ carnal appetites, simply helped to swell his bank balance.

From his new home in Ocean County, near the Jersey Shore, he built up a crew of between fifteen and twenty associates and proceeded to do his best to become not just a wheel in, but the engine of smut, on that part of the East coast.

To achieve this, he would link-up with a notorious capo or crew chief in the Gambino Crime Family, a court judge who may or may not have been on the take, a man who claimed to speak not only to the dead but also to pigeons, and in addition to dealing in prostitution and pornography, would also be involved in extortion, armed robbery, the sale of cocaine, and murder in an endeavor that would bring his strange and complex life full circle.

An associate at this period in Petillo’s life described him as “a man who wears heavy, horn-rimmed glasses, carries a pot-belly, walks slowly and talks out of the side of his mouth.” Shades of Edward G. Robinson!

An FBI file dated June 31st, 1981, refers to “David Silvio Petillo, born 03-20-1908, (he was actually born March 11th, but the Feds kept getting is birthday mixed up in their reports,) as a cocaine and marijuana trafficker, active in the sex industry in New York City and Ocean County, New jersey, and conspirator in gangland murder on February 4th 1980 at Brick Township, New Jersey. A long-time Genovese soldier.”

A resume to be proud of for any full-blooded 73-year-old American male in his twilight years.

Historically, the Genovese Family has always been the most powerful Cosa Nostra family in The Garden State and the first New York-based family to expand its rackets there, over eighty years ago.

Petillo had close ties to many of the family’s members including Anthony “Little Pussy” Russo, a well-known figure in the Newark branch of the family, until his murder in April 1979. His association with Bonanno capo “Sonny Red” Indilacato and soldier Tony Mirra, gave him access to porn and drug distribution in New Jersey and New York, and he was close to Thomas “Crazy Tommy” Contaldo a powerful, and violent crew chief in Brooklyn who was recognized by the FBN as a major drug wholesaler.

Petillo would often drive up from Brick in his little, brown Chevrolet Vega, and visit these men on a regular basis. Contaldo hung out at The Dixie Tavern on 20th Street and 5th Avenue, in South Slope, that was owned by Salvatore Gaetano Maiorana, better known locally as “Toddo Marino” another venerable and powerful captain in the Genovese mob who peddled narcotics alongside a whole raft of illegal activities such as union corruption, illegal gaming machines, bookmaking, and numbers running. Little Davy would also meet up with Rosario Mogavero who controlled gambling, loansharking and narcotics along the Lower East Side waterfront for the Genovese. “Saro” was a good match for Petillo: same height, just a few years younger, and had started his hitman career for the mob when he was just fourteen.

Petillo’s never-ending hustling was the standard for hoods that rarely held down a regular job. They would often work 24 hours a day simply to avoid being a normal nine to five commuter who paid his dues to Uncle Sam, although Little Davy did have a ‘legitimate’ job for tax purposes. On his release from his second

prison term, he became a member of Local 209 of the Teamsters Union and was employed at a tailor’s shop on West 52nd Street in Manhattan. A classic ‘no-show’ job that would appease his probation officer, and indicate his willingness to appear to be moving away from his criminal background.

One of Petillo’s contacts in the porn industry during the early 1970s was Paul E. Rothenberg, who ran his business through a company called Arrow Films, based on Spring Street, just north of Little Italy, in Manhattan. One of the largest New York producers of smut and awful smut, (i.e. pedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia etc.,) he could produce an 8 millimeter film for $2:50 and re-sell it for $30. The mob could see the huge profits to be made in this business and knew that the laws relating to porn were complex and often difficult to enforce. A grand jury investigation in New York in the early 1970s determined that the Mafia controlled 90% of hardcore (the version that is prosecutable) pornography in the United States. Little Davy worked with Rothenberg until somehow or other, the Gambino Family moved in.

Capo Anthony Gaggi and one of his mad-dog killers, Roy De Meo, apparently shunted Petillo to one side, (or he handed over his contact willingly due to his ambition to move to and settle in Italy,) and made themselves partners with Rothenberg, until they killed him in July 1973, believing he was turning, and co-operating with the law. Whatever the reason was, Gaggi and Petillo stayed close.

A New Jersey grand jury indictment levelled against Little Davy and his associates in April 1983, following the murder of Vassallo, three years earlier, also included Anthony Gaggi, who was still in the mix with Davy as he was charged on the same bill with promoting prostitution and actually listed as one of Petillo’s crew. A Gambino capo working for a Genovese capo, or even more bizarre, soldier. Stranger than fiction! Or much more likely, law enforcement had not quite figured out who was who in this strange, convoluted maze of Mad Hatters and Alice in Wonderland tea gardens of criminal conspiracy.

Petillo had moved earlier to squash a federal subpoena to appear before a grand jury in February 1975, that was investigating adult bookstores in Ocean and Monmouth Counties from which he was earning. He was by then, working with Ross Lee Cooper, the man who had found him a house to rent, in Brick Township when Petillo and his wife moved to New Jersey. Cooper was entwined with Edward Vassallo in a complex relationship involving money, real estate, pornography, and mayhem. A trellis-work of duplicity and corruption that would bring the whole house of cards down. And the joker in the pack was Little Davy, who would come to deal the hand of death to his nephew. All in good time.

A month or so after Edward Vassallo helped his uncle kill Gagliodotto, he shot and killed a 23-year-old man, called John Scully, in an after-hours bar, in Queens, late in the evening of October 20th. Scully had been bad-mouthing Italians, they got into

a fight, and then he was dead. Vassallo fled to New Jersey, and moved into a house in Brick Township with his common-law wife, Frances McGuire, changed his name to Charles Talbot, and opened a business in Point Pleasant, Ocean County.

Towards the end of the 1960s, Vassallo had been dealing in the smut business in partnership with a man called Charlie Pomaro, who owned a hairdressing salon on 1st Avenue, in Lower Manhattan. Petillo may have been financing this operation according to underworld sources. Pomaro was allegedly a member or an associate of the Genovese Crime Family and became part of the crew Petillo set up in Ocean County, and it seems, Little Davy’s right-hand man.

Pomaro operated another hairdressing salon in Brick Township called “The Cut Above” which was used as an after-hours meeting venue for Petillo and his crew. Ross Cooper first met Pomaro when he was looking for premises to house one of his adult bookshops and found one that was owned in part by Pomaro, in Ocean Township.

In September 1970, Edward Vassallo was stopped by a state trooper and arrested for drunk driving. His fingerprints were taken and in May 1971, he was linked by these into the killing of Scully. He was subsequently tried and convicted of manslaughter, Class B, and sentenced to confinement at Attica State Prison in April 1974.

Two years later, on May 13th, 1976, the FBI’s Newark office closed down the Bureau’s nine-year-long surveillance on David Petillo believing he had retired due to ill health. Informants had confirmed he’d suffered a stroke and a heart attack and was no longer active.

While Vassallo was in prison, Frances McGuire and his parents managed his money and looked after a business he had started and a property he had purchased. Ross Cooper approached them about financing him into a business venture which became known in early 1979, as The Egyptian, a gay health spa in a building on Route 88 in Brick, that also included adult book shops. When Vassallo was released from Attica in 1977, he returned to the area and became involved in these ventures along with Cooper, who he had first met in the early 1970s when they had jointly opened an adult bookshop in Ocean County. The spa was a lucrative venture, with over 8000 paying members.

Journalist Steven J. Baeli referred to the place as “Ocean County’s sexual epicenter.”

As the 1970s came to a close, Petillo came to believe that his nephew was short-changing him on his cut from the porn business he had invested in, and even worse, was bad-mouthing and criticizing his actions. Two really bad moves against a man like him.

He called a meeting with Pomaro and two other members of his crew, Vito Fiore and Orazio “Tony T” Turiano. They met at a social club on Mulberry Street, in New York’s little Italy, towards the end of 1979, and laid out the killing plan. His nephew would go early in the new year, after his mother, Lucille, had died from the cancer that was destroying her. Outlandish as it may seem, Petillo had told her he was going to kill her son, and she had begged him to wait until she was gone. Which she was, by December.

The kill-shot was to be delivered in January. Petillo and his wife disappeared from Brick to establish an alibi. Perhaps to Canada, or Switzerland or somewhere, equally far away. Pomaro, taking a lead maybe, from Vincent Gigante who would one day become the boss of the Genovese, and spent half his life in and out of mental institutions to avoid the police, booked himself into the psychiatric ward of Riverview Hospital in Red Bank, New Jersey, for a week. He told doctors he had found himself talking to pigeons and at times his father, which was interesting because he had been dead many years. He later admitted in court, that he had faked insanity in the past to collect medical benefits, and to use as a defense in criminal charges against him.

For unknown reasons, the hit was cancelled. Petillo rang Pomaro in late January and demanded the job be done, immediately. On the night of February 4th, Pomaro, Turiano, and Fiore met at the beauty salon in Brick managed by John Scott, who was to be their driver. He carried them in a white panel van to Vassallo’s house and waited, parked two houses down the street, in the driveway of Petillo’s rented property. After the shooting, at about 10:15 pm, the men were driven back into Brick and dispersed. Pomaro and Vassallo had been friends since their boyhood days in Manhattan. Later, in courtroom testimony, he confessed killing him “was just business.”

It was later alleged that Scott wrapped the three handguns used in the shooting in a black bag and handed them over for safe-keeping to Adolph Carbone, a municipal judge in Barnegat, who eventually passed them back to Pomaro. He and the other two shooters threw the weapons off a bridge into the Metedecont River, later in the year. The judge denied any involvement but resigned his position soon after the allegation was made. Petillo was a close friend of Carbone and would often visit him at one of the judge’s property holdings, The Carousel Arcade, in Seaside Heights.

When Petillo returned to Brick after Vassallo was dead, he allegedly took over control of his porn holdings. Unknown to him, one of the crew, Anthony Volpe, had been recruited by the Ocean County’s prosecutor’s office and had been wearing a wire from December 1979 until December 1981 when his handlers pulled him in. He recorded 45 tapes which became the basis for a major indictment handed down by a State Grand Jury in April 1983 against Petillo and his men, which included armed robbery, home invasion, drug dealing and extortion in addition to pornography

and prostitution charges. Pomaro and John Scott rolled and turned informant for a lesser sentence, and Little Davy, with that magic instinct for survival, in one way or another got wind of all this and he and Phyliss were gone by the end of January or early February 1982.

Had he stayed and been arrested and convicted of the criminal acts listed in the statement of accusation, he would have faced 117 years in prison. David Petillo knew all about prisons and wasn’t going near one, ever again. He also knew just what J. Edgar Hoover meant when he said “Justice is incidental to law and order.”

If only hubris, greed, and jealousy had not reared their ugly heads in his relationship with his nephew.

As Shakespeare in MacBeth reminisced, “Nothing in his life became it like the leaving it.”

Edward Vassallo wasn’t just part of the criminal social matrix in which Petillo and his associates operated; his murder set in motion events that brought Little Davy almost full circle in his strange and complex life. From the killing fields of Cleveland and Chicago and New York to the suburban sprawl of Ocean County, detouring through various prisons, it was a journey that could only ever have one ending.

Did the nephew really steal from the uncle and openly criticize him? We will never know. As Nick Tosches once observed, “The only true secrets are those that remain hidden. The only true mysteries, those that can never be solved.”

The only one who may know the secrets or some of them at least, is Phyliss who, if she still lives, will be 68 in December 2017.

How many nights did Little Davy spend wrestling with his own devils? How much of his inner landscape was a nightmare? Did he ever give thought to the men he had killed, such as “Chalutz” Gagliodotto? The lives he had ruined by his actions? Maybe, in the shadows of the night, he told his bedroom ceiling how much he yearned to live a simpler life. In those final days in Andalusia, perhaps he finally came to find peace with himself.

David Petillo spent almost half of his life behind bars, and yet he still managed a criminal career that while almost unknown today, had law enforcement agencies of the time, falling over themselves trying to snare him.

The FBI and the FBN and to a lesser degree, New York’s police department, went after him with a determination which in retrospect, was in essence, a sound and fury allusion. His sordid past came to haunt him for the remainder of his days. Running the biggest prostitution ring in America was no MBA for the future success of his opprobrious lifestyle. He was undoubtedly a career

criminal, but hardly of the level that deserved the attention he was given by police and federal officers.

The FBI, in particular dogged him for years, and then relinquished their chase, just as Little Davy was getting his second wind. To paraphrase Craig McDonald, “Never put justify and the FBI in the same sentence.”

Giving up, just as their target was in his final furlong, maybe this was the biggest enigma of all, in the story of the law and David Petillo.

As Ernest Hemingway wrote, “Every man’s life ends the same way. It is only the details of how he lived that distinguishes one man from another.”

> *"Trying to eliminate La Cosa Nostra is like trying to kill a vampire."*
>
> - ***James Waldren, former federal prosecutor***

1. Mob Boss. The Life of Little Al D’Arco. Jerry Capeci and Tom Robbins. 2013. St. Martin’s Press.

2.‘finocchio’ is Italian for fennel and by extension a negative word for gay. Some say that this is because its bulb looks like male genitals

3 All the Way Down: The Violent World of Street Gangs. Vincent Riccio. 1962. Simon & Schuster.

4. The Winner Takes Nothing. Ernest Hemingway. 1934. Jonathan Cape Publishers.

5. Italian Wikipedia site.

6. Vita di Capomafia. 1963. Editori Riuniti.

7. Twenty Against the Underworld. Thomas Dewey. 1974. Doubleday & Co.

 # Edward Vassallo is generally reported as being the nephew of David Petillo, who according to official sources, had one brother, Roland, and four sisters, Clara, Florence, Lavenia and Anna, none of who were apparently married to anyone called Vassallo. I found one reference to Vassallo being Petillo’s cousin, (1) without any supporting details.

I would like to acknowledge The History of Pornography in Ocean County, Part III by Steven J. Baeli, 2010, as a source for some of my research.